

The smearing campaign against Swedish oncologist Dr Hardell and the persons behind it

An Italian ruling based on Hardell's results

On October 12th 2012, the [Italian Supreme Court ruled](#) that use of mobile and cordless phones can cause brain tumor. In this landmark decision, the results from the Swedish research group led by oncologist and epidemiologist Dr Lennart Hardell at the Örebro University Hospital were important. Hardell's group has [consistently found](#) that mobile and cordless phones increase the risk of brain tumors.

The ruling gave credit to the Italian businessman Innocente Marcolini and that his severe disease was caused by his intense use of the microwave emitting devices. However it was not applauded by everybody. [Professor Alexander Lerchl](#) at the Jacobs University in Germany was among those who did not. Instead he joined a group of persons who already a decade ago went fishing for something smearing about Hardell.

The catch is an old report from the mid 1980's about a totally different and since more than a decade settled issue: the chemical dioxin as a carcinogen to humans. Hardell and his former group at the Umeå University Hospital in Sweden found repeatedly during the 1980's that dioxin increased risks of cancer among exposed workers. Dioxin was a decade later, in 1997, classified by the WHO International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) as a first class cancer causing agent (Group 1) based on not only later epidemiological evidence from the 1990's confirming Hardell's results, but also sufficient evidence in experimental animals and extensive mechanistic results about its cancer causing properties.¹

Still Hardell is considered to be "a problem". The reason seems to be his research focus on agents that cause cancer among humans, not only chemical exposure but perhaps more importantly his focus during the last decade: mobile phones. A focus that confronts the concern of a multibillion-dollar industry, namely the threats that any results showing increasing risks of brain tumors from mobile phone use entail. Such results may severely impact this very economic powerful and influential industry.

Already in 2002 and nine years later in 2011 some persons were looking for something negative about Hardell. They found the same old report as professor Lerchl has drawn up from the deep archives of the Swedish Radiation Protection Authority. It was planted there back in 2002 by its former director, Lars-Erik Holm, today the Head of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare. Most of the below events are described in my book "*Mobiltelefonins hälsorisker*" from 2010.

These smearing activities all coincided with three important and critical events in the issue of mobile phones and brain tumour risks:

- In 2002 with a critical phase in Dr Christopher Newman's brain tumor court case in the USA. Newman sued the mobile phone companies in 2000 for a brain tumor that finally ended his life.
- In 2011 the evaluation of cancer risks from mobile phone radiation at the International Agency for Research on Cancer, IARC.
- The third time the recent Italian ruling.

2001-2002: The Newman case, professor Adami and a US network of experts with ties to industry

In April 2002 professor [Hans-Olov Adami](#), at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden and Harvard School of Public Health, received an anonymous smearing letter about Hardell. The anonymous sender wrote that he had followed Adami's and others "excellent articles" in the press lately and accused Hardell of inventing data. The letter contained nothing but few unsubstantiated allegations and mostly expressed the anonymous writer's frustration over the fact that Hardell had received research grants and a prize from the Swedish Cancer and Allergy Foundation:

Maybe this information can help you in your struggle to go to the bottom with the problem Lennart Hardell?

During 2001, while the Newman case was ongoing, Adami was first author of an article attacking Hardell's research first published in Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet. It was translated to English and also published in Bioelectromagnetics One of the cosigners of the English version "[Experts who talk rubbish](#)" was

¹ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1247514/>

interestingly enough professor Anders Ahlbom. He seems not to have read the article he signed thoroughly, since he was at the time investigating the same aspect that he and Adami claimed to be “bizarre” with Hardell’s study. Also, Ahlbom’s brother was at the same time a lobbyist for the leading Swedish telecom operator in Brussels, a relation that was unknown to most until ten years later.

Adami, the first author of the article about the “bizarre” finding of an increased risk of brain tumors on the same side as the mobile phone was held, is since many years funded by the chemical industry and member of its External Scientific Advisory Panel (CEFIC)² and (as such) gives most chemical exposure as for instance formaldehyde and [atrazine](#) an “[all clear](#)”³ for cancer, and in addition chemicals that Hardell⁴ had shown to raise cancer risks among exposed workers. He is also a long time external collaborator with the Exponent consulting firm⁵, the most well-known product defense firm in the USA. He has published articles with Exponent consultants [paid for directly by the chemical industry](#).⁶ Exponent has both the chemical industry and the mobile phone industry as clients.

Adami also signed an editorial about mobile phone use and brain tumours earlier in 2001.⁷ The other cosigner was professor [Dimitrios Trichopoulos](#), Adami’s frequent collaborator at Harvard. Their article allayed “fears raised by alarmist reports that the use of cellular telephones causes brain tumors” (the statement was based on [a study with only 11 cases that had used a mobile phone for more than 5 years](#)) and recommended inaction until brain tumor risks were firmly documented:

“we believe that it is highly unlikely that the use of cellular telephones substantially increases the risk of brain tumor.”

During the same time Adami’s and Trichopoulos’s colleague at Harvard, professor [Meir Stampfer](#), was involved in the Newman case on the industry’s side. Hardell on the other hand was involved as key expert for the brain tumour affected Dr Newman. The media reported after Hardell had testified in the court in February 2002 that much of the case would rest upon Hardell’s credentials and reliability.

After receiving the anonymous letter, Adami forwarded it to the head of Örebro University in an apparent attempt to cause Hardell troubles. He also called the Director of the Swedish Radiation Protection Authority Lars-Erik Holm about Hardell and the anonymous letter. Adami then sent the letter also to Holm.

The Swedish Radiation Protection Authority director Lars-Erik Holm and the consulting firm IEI

Soon after that, Lars-Erik Holm and John Boice, at the International Epidemiology Institute, IEI, a private consultant firm in USA, were in contact over the phone. The contact resulted in Holm placing an order for an evaluation from Boice on 10-15 pages of the epidemiological studies on mobile phones and brain tumors. Boice, Holm, Adami and Trichopoulos all knew each other since many years. Adami and Boice, for instance, had collaborated about a study on breast implants, [paid for by the breast implants producer Dow Corning, through IEI](#). IEI had officially until 2000 written on its web-page that they assisted companies with legal problems. Adami’s colleague, Trichopoulos, was also on the board of scientific advisors to IEI.

Interestingly, IEI appears to be previously involved in some way on the same side as professor Stampfer in the ongoing Newman case. [A fax number revealed that IEI](#) was the peer-reviewers that six months earlier, in November 2001, rejected Hardell’s new study to be published in a scientific magazine. Motorola’s lawyer Tom Watson was informed about this and asked the peer-review comments to be included in the case. Only IEI could be the source to the Motorola defense.

In addition, IEI was involved in [a Danish cohort study](#) funded by the Danish phone operators and IEI. The cohort study published only a year earlier in February 2001, reported no increased risks of cancers and brain tumors among 400 000 Danish mobile phone subscribers, while excluding 200 000 of the heaviest users. There are examples on other issues when IEI funded studies, but originally was paid by the involved industry (e.g. Dow Corning – breast implants, margarine – margarine industry).

² CEFIC LRI Research Initiative: Annual Progress Report 2001: Among listed External Science Advisory members 2001: Hans-Olov Adami

³ FormaCare press release September 2007: FormaCare: International Science Conference in Barcelona. Formaldehyde on the way to rehabilitation

⁴ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11936821>

⁵ For example: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22024235>

⁶ <http://www.gbg.bonnet.se/bwf/art/industrialTies.html>

⁷ <http://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJM200101113440209>

Holm offered Boice 100 000 SEK for the report, and ignored the fact that Boice had done one of the studies, funded by mobile phone operators, that was to be evaluated. The evaluation by IEI should “be ready within 2-4 weeks after the publication of the new Swedish data” according to the written confirmation by Holm to Boice. The Swedish data Holm referred to was Hardell’s new results on mobile phone use and the risk for brain tumors expected to be published soon.

Holm’s next step was to call the retired 83-year old professor, Lars-Gunnar Larsson, and ask for a report from the mid 1980’s. The report was sent to Holm’s private address. [Larsson later told](#) a journalist that Holm called him and asked for the report and so did two other persons: one was a co-signer of Adami’s article attacking Hardell from 2001, professor [Magnus Ingelman-Sundberg](#) at the Karolinska Institute. The third person was an employee from Swedish Power giant Vattenfall Power Consultant, and member of the Swedish skeptic’s organization, Björn Cedervall. However Larsson refused to send the report to the two others. Only Holm was allowed to receive it. Larsson asked Holm to handle the report confidentially.

One week later Holm assigned Anders Ahlbom as chairman of the authority’s (Swedish Radiation Protection Authority) “independent expert group”. He was to stay there and produce 8 reports that dismissed Hardell’s as well as other results showing health risks with mobile phone radiation, until June 2011 when he resigned due to [undeclared conflict of interests](#).

Today ten years later when asked about these events Holm claims that it was Larsson that suddenly called him in spring 2002 about the report written 16 years earlier. However the series of events speaks for Larsson’s version.

The journalist

As agreed, Boice and McLaughlin produced [a report](#). As can be expected, it was very critical to Hardell’s studies and praised studies showing no risks, among them their own industry funded Danish cohort study, failing to mention that it excluded the 200 000 heaviest users. At the time the report was ready Holm brought Larsson’s report from his home to his office and filed it so it became an official publicly available document at the authority. By then he also sent the anonymous smearing letter about Hardell to the head of Umeå University. Both Örebro and Umeå universities, however, disregarded the anonymous smearing letter with unsubstantiated allegations that mostly expressed frustration over Hardell receiving grants and prizes from The Cancer and Allergy Foundation. Holm (or Adami) probably then notified the journalist Inger Atterstam at the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet about the Larsson report and the IEI report.

Atterstam accordingly wrote two very unbalanced and critical articles about Hardell that were published the same day in Svenska Dagbladet. The articles claimed that Hardell was “the Swedish master of cancer alarms” arguing that Hardell had claimed that “everything from tampons to breast feeding and TV-sets were cancer risks”, without exploring deeper into the subjects: Hardell had claimed that tampons bleached with chlorine could contain dioxin which was a known cancer causing chemical. He had also found that breast milk could expose the child to the chemicals (Persistent Organic Pollutants, POPs) accumulated by the mother known to increase risks of cancer and that breast feeding was related to an increased risk of lymphoma. POPs in Swedish mother’s milk had been a concern during the 1970’s and 1980’s, since the intake for the breast-fed child has exceeded estimated tolerable daily intake by 20 to 30 fold.⁸ TV-sets put on landfills could contaminate the ground water with chemicals. All three are quite uncontroversial claims when put in right context and not simplified in order to make them look ridiculous.

After the publications of the two articles, Larsson wrote to Hardell that he was contacted by Atterstam the days before she published her articles. He begged her not to write about “this old story”. Larsson passed away in 2009, 90 years old.

Hardell’s version

Hardell on his side claims that he, professor Larsson and professor Bo Littbrand (the head of the responsible unit at Umeå University Hospital) at the time in Umeå, in 1985, had a meeting, where the disputes between Hardell and Larsson were all cleared. According to Hardell, Larsson’s report contained several misunderstandings and inaccurate unfounded statements. Hardell’s view is supported by his boss at that time, professor Bo Littbrand, who sends a statement in December 2012 to Hardell saying that “no one in this group put forward any accusation of scientific fraud to me and I had the same opinion in this aspect”.⁹ Hardell never

⁸ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11305266>

⁹ Letter to Lennart Hardell from Bo Littbrand, professor emeritus, 2012-12-16

heard of or saw Larsson's report until Atterstam contacted him in September 2002, the evening before the publication of her two articles. He was offered no opportunity to give his view on the accusations.

In Atterstam's second article in Svenska Dagbladet published the same day she again attacked Hardell as she uncritically reported about the conclusions from IEI. Boice and McLaughlin were described as "two leading American researchers". Apparently ignorant about their involvement in the Danish industry funded study she wrote that they had "no known relation to the mobile phone industry". Their conclusions were reported to be "*devastating primarily against professor Lennart Hardell who has produced the majority of the studies that pretends to show cancer risks from mobile phones*".¹⁰

2011: The IARC cancer evaluation and professor Anders Ahlbom's efforts to get Hardell off the group

In May 2011, it was professor Anders Ahlbom's turn to go fishing for anything smearing about Hardell. Ahlbom had just got the message that IARC did not accept him on the working group evaluating cancer risks from mobile phone radiation due to his undeclared potential conflict of interest¹¹. In response, his first move was to repeatedly try to have Hardell excluded from IARC. With this in mind, he asked Lars-Erik Holm, now at the Swedish National Board of Health, for the 25-year-old report from Larsson. He also asked if Holm might be willing to send it directly to IARC? Holm declined but offered to send Ahlbom a copy (he still had a copy at home), who then upon receipt forwarded the report to IARC.

Ahlbom was a coauthor of Adami's article from 2001 (Experts who talk rubbish) attacking Hardell, and had during a decade consistently dismissed any health risks from mobile phones and Hardell's studies. He was also a member of ICNIRP and as such had recommended the radiation limits for mobile phones that would be inadequate if a cancer risk was acknowledged. Furthermore Ahlbom is heavily funded by the mobile phone industry (Interphone, Cosmos).

Adami came to support Ahlbom's efforts towards IARC. He was upset by IARC's decision not to accept Ahlbom's conflict of interest (being on the board of a consulting firm specifically directed to the telecommunications industry) and was the first to sign a [protest letter](#) sent to the IARC¹² arguing that "others" had more conflicts of interests than Ahlbom (understood to be Hardell –Ahlbom had been emailing with the director of IARC about Hardell during the past days, so the director would know who they were talking about)¹³.

However the efforts were in vain, Hardell remained in the working group at IARC. A week later, on May 30 2011, the result was communicated worldwide and as feared by Ahlbom and his allies: The mobile phone radiation was classified as "possibly carcinogenic to humans", class 2B.

The most efficient product defense strategy?

The actions described here, that aim at discrediting the integrity and honesty of an independent scientist whose results are unwelcome to an economic powerful industry, may have long lasting impact on a scientist's ability to continue research. "The most devastating and therefore potentially most effective strategy for discrediting bothersome research is to challenge the researcher's professional integrity" Thomas O McGarity and Wendy E Wagner wrote in "Bending science. How special interests corrupt public health research". The harassment of the scientist Irving J. Selikoff is one early example. After Selikoff had presented results on health effects of asbestos in 1964, one executive from an asbestos producer described Selikoff as a problem, just like Hardell was described by the anonymous writer: "*Our concern is to find some way of preventing Dr Selikoff from creating problems and affecting sales.*"

Coordinated attacks in the press, often orchestrated by PR-firms, are also frequently used from the tool-box of an efficient strategy. Those attacks may emanate both from industry directly, but preferably from advocates seemingly *independent* from industry interests.

Interestingly, most attackers on the integrity of Hardell in these three examples have financial ties to the industry or the industry's consultants and they are all professors: Hans-Olov Adami, Anders Ahlbom and Alexander Lerchl. But not all. There is the case of Lars-Erik Holm, the Director of two Swedish authorities. He is supposed to, according to Swedish constitution, be objective in his role of protecting the health of the Swedes. But here he is found to be the spider of the net of a seemingly coordinated attack against a scientist that report

¹⁰ Svenska Dagbladet September 19, 2002:Larmrapporter kan inte styrkas; Inger Atterstam

¹¹ <http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Meetings/vol102-participants.pdf> see footnote 6

¹² Microwave News, May 26, 2011: Ahlbom's Colleagues Express "Outrage" at IARC, Attack Hardell

¹³ Email from professor Maria Feychting May 23rd 2011

unwelcome results that are a threat to the future of a powerful industry. It includes the forwarding of an anonymous smearing letter about this scientist that is among the first to report increased risks from mobile phone exposure. Holm's motives remain to be explained.

Mona Nilsson